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York gets the subway — Read all about it on page 5

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THE SPADINA SUBWAY EXTENSION THROUGH YORK UNIVERSITY - REFLECTIONS ON THE STRUGGLE FOR APPROVALS

Ted Spence, Professor Emeritus York University

In January of 1970, I successfully interviewed for a faculty position in the Geography Department at York University and that day I signed a petition in Central Square urging the provincial government to cancel the planned construction of the Spadina Expressway which would have linked the Downsview and York University area to downtown. When a year later Premier Bill Davis announced the cancelation of the expressway we all celebrated a victory for public engagement in planning and believed the next step would be the construction of the subway which was planned for the same route linking downtown to the northeast parts of the city. None of us imagined it would take 8 years to see the subway reach to just north of Highway 401 and then another 38 years before the subway is expected to open to the York campus in 2016.

As my own 39 year career at York evolved my work provided opportunities for me to be involved in campus planning. In 1997, having completed 10 years as dean of York’ Faculty of Environmental Studies (FES), I was appointed by University President Lorna Marsden as her Senior Policy Advisor. For the next 9 years I was directly involved in most significant planning decisions at York and I was given specific responsibilities for a leadership role in York’s efforts to see the Spadina Subway extended to the campus and beyond. In this short article I want to share some of my experiences as we worked towards gaining approvals and funding from three levels of government to ensure the extension of the subway.

Throughout my MSc and PhD studies in geography, at the University of Western Ontario and the University of Alberta, respectively, I was encouraged to maintain a broad program of study reflecting the holistic approach of those departments to geography. This meant that in addition to my physical geography focus on water resources and resource management, I always maintained a minor specialization in urban geography and planning. Later this became a side interest and I became engaged in various municipal planning related committees. After joining the FES I participated in the planning program and eventually became a full member of the Ontario Professional Planners Institute (OPPI). At York I was appointed to the advisory group on university land use planning. In fact by 1997 I had gained a lot of relevant urban experience before taking on the role of advocating for the planning and approvals for the York subway extension.

A brief overview of Subway Construction in Toronto from 1950 to 1978

In 1954 Toronto’s first subway, the Yonge Line, opened from Union Station to Eglinton and in 1963 the University Avenue section of the line opened from Union Station to St George. In 1966 the Bloor-Danforth Line opened. In 1973 the Yonge Line was extended to York Mills and then to Finch in 1974. Finally in 1978, the promised Spadina Line opened from St George to Wilson. But Toronto’s subway building boom was over and the Spadina Line ended well short of York’s rapidly expanding campus at Keele and Steeles.

1993 We Almost Had the Subway to York with the Subway Loop

In 1985 under the leadership of York University President Harry Arthurs, the university established the York University Development Corporation (YUDC) to manage the planning and development of York’s lands. From the beginning I served as a member of the YUDC Advisory Council and was a party to the process that led to the approval of the York University Master Plan in 1988. The Master Plan clearly laid out York’s goal to see the subway extended to the campus.

In 1992 the Province of Ontario and the Council of Metropolitan Toronto approved a transit expansion plan, called “Let’s Move”, that included 4 subway projects including a Yonge-Spadina Subway Loop from Wilson Station North to Keele and Steeles and then eastward along Steeles to Yonge and south to Finch. The concept was an exciting one for the University because it would have given our community direct connections to both the Yonge and Spadina subway lines. The other major competing project proposals were for the Eglinton Subway, the Sheppard Subway and a westward extension of the Bloor Subway.

In 1993 Environmental Assessment reports were completed for each of the proposed subway expansion projects and the Provincial Government under Premier Bob Rae announced funding for up to four subway expansion projects including the Spadina Loop. York’s then Vice President of External Relations, Ian Lithgow, along with landowners and commercial interests in both Vaughan and North York organized the “Loop Group” to support the Spadina Loop proposal. I recall being part of large York delegations, led by President Arthurs, in attendance at both North York and Metro Toronto public meetings and council meetings, where

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critical decisions were made. Unfortunately for the University, the Mayor of North York at the time, Mel Lastman, chose to champion the Sheppard Subway proposal over the Spadina Loop proposal. He then appeared to sell out the Spadina Loop at Metro Council in favour of approvals for both the Sheppard and the Eglinton Lines. In the end the Spadina Subway loop lost out to the Eglinton project in a very close vote at Metro Council and we all went home bitterly disappointed feeling the commercial interests in North York had used their political clout to sell out the heavily transit dependent communities of York University and the high density lower income population centres of North York located west of the University along the full length of Finch Avenue West.

It is was at Metro Council in 1993 where I first heard city politicians expressing the view that the Subway should be a Toronto only resource and the loop extension to Steeles Avenue would help developments outside the city and should not be supported. This was a theme that we had to confront over and over in the following 15 years as we worked to advance the Spadina Subway extension proposals.

Had we won approval over the Eglinton Line in 1993 at Metro Council, it might have been only a short term victory. In 1995 the new Mike Harris provincial government withdrew funding from the Eglinton Subway project and even required that the excavations which had begun be filled in. At the same time funding for the Sheppard Line was threatened and the pace of construction was slowed with the line not completed until 2002. To this day when I ride the Sheppard Line I am always shocked and disappointed by how few riders there are on that subway except at rush hours. Sheppard was the first new subway line built in Toronto in the 36 years since the 1966 opening of the Bloor-Danforth Subway line.

In anticipation of a future extension of the Sheppard Subway westward to connect with the Spadina Line, a short extension of the Spadina Line to Downsview opened in 1996 providing a slightly shorter bus ride for York commuters.

Building a Coalition of Support for the Spadina Subway Extension after our Loop Defeat.

In the late 1990s there seemed to be little government interest or new public funding available for new subway projects, and government initiatives in the transit field were limited to the continued funding of operations and the Sheppard Subway construction. But beginning in 1998 York University along with the City of Vaughan stepped up our efforts to advance the subway extension proposal.

In January of 1998 I joined York President Lorna Marsden’s new administrative team. She and the York Board of Governors had already identified advancing York’s subway extension initiative as a top priority. We immediately began an intense effort to advance the subway project and for the next 9 years I found that part of every week and at least a small part of most days was spent working on the subway priority. It turned out to be a very rewarding journey.

At York I worked closely with Tom Arnold who was Executive Director of York’s Security, Parking and Transportation Services and who was responsible for the significant growth in transit riders at York and who managed the University’s relationships with the transit providers. When Tom died suddenly in 2003 his memorial was attended by all of the major players in the transit field in the GTA. He had done much to lay the groundwork for transit expansion at York. I was also greatly assisted in my work by Cameron MacKinnon a York Environmental Studies graduate and government relations specialist.

We knew from our failure in 1993 that York University alone was not enough of an argument to get a subway extension approved. We also recognized that York University was not well enough known and understood in the communities of York Region or in the City of Toronto. Our location was isolated and off the regular travel routes in the GTA and most people had not recently visited the campus and had no idea of our recent enrolment growth, or of the size and importance of our university. We set about raising York’s profile throughout the GTA with an initial focus on York Region and the City of Toronto. We started building a coalition of interested groups to press the subway extension case.

Beginning in 1998 we established a close working relationship with the City of Vaughan and York Region. With Vaughan we set up the Spadina-York Subway Extension Committee (SYSEC). The Group was Co-chaired by Councillor Mario Racco of Vaughan and myself representing the University. The membership included senior planning staff and politicians from Vaughan and York Region, senior officials from York Region Transit (YRT) and GO Transit, and two representatives from the City of Toronto Council, and the leadership of major labour union groups. Representatives of the TTC attended all meetings of SYSEC as observers. The SYSEC met regularly over a 9 year period until after project approval in 2006. The SYSEC was an important force in raising the profile of the project and in keeping a wide range of representatives up to date on progress and on issues as they arose. The two representatives of the Toronto Council were Peter Li Preti and Karen Stintz. LiPreti was the local councillor from the campus area and Stintz, who is now chair of the TTC, was Councillor for Ward 16 which is located North of Eglinton and South of 401 between Bathurst and Yonge, an area where large numbers of York students, faculty and staff live. She was already a strong advocate for transit and stood strongly in support of the SYSEC work all the way through approval of the subway extension. Councillor Maria Augimeri from our adjacent ward was also a strong supporter throughout the process.

From the beginning the Chairman of York Region, Bill Fisch, a transit advocate who has led the initiative to bring expanded transit throughout York Region, was a strong supporter of the work of SYSEC. In 1998 President Marsden and I visited Chairman Fisch and then each of the mayors of the municipalities in York Region to bring them up to date on developments at the University and to ensure their support for the
subway initiative. We also met with the senior management at York Region Transit (YRT) and GO Transit to establish close working relationships in support of the project.

During 1999 we consulted widely in both the 416 and 905 communities meeting with leading transportation planning analysts, with the Greater Toronto Services Board (GTSB), with all of the municipal CAOs from York Region municipalities, with community leaders, and with key provincial officials right up to the premier’s office. We also began to meet regularly with federal politicians and officials to help raise the profile of the University and of our project.

In many of our meetings with senior politicians and other provincial and federal officials and behind the scenes, we were strongly supported by the active participation of Seymour Schulich, a major York benefactor; Avie Bennett, our University Chancellor; and by the President of YUDC, Bud Purves. We also provided Seymour Schulich with documents and materials for use in private meetings he organized.

With the assistance of Dave Smith and others in York’s Office of Institutional Research and Analysis, we compiled statistical material and maps to document York University’s significance in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). By 1999 we had already become a community of 50,000 students, faculty and staff. We found that of our 34,000 undergraduate students 50% had home addresses in Toronto and 38% had home addresses in the suburban communities of the 905. Almost all of our faculty and staff lived in the GTA. From that point forward we kept these data and maps updated on an annual basis and added details on transportation, payroll, and economic impact. We mapped the home addresses of all York students, York Alumni, and faculty and staff living in the GTA (see p. 9). Our data set and maps became the foundation for our efforts to keep the Spadina Subway extension high on everyone’s list of transportation priorities. We presented our data and maps whenever and wherever possible and succeeded in making key decision makers much more aware of the University’s size and importance in the GTA, in the Province and nationally. We were able to easily customize our presentations to include maps and data at the scale of a single ward or a provincial or federal riding depending on who we were meeting.

By 2005 at the height of our subway efforts our data sets and maps highlighted the following key facts as the core of our message:

- York was a community of 60,000 students, faculty and staff and over 52,000 had GTA home addresses, including 28,000 in Toronto and 13,000 in York Region which had become Canada’s fastest growing municipality. In addition in 2005 we also had more than 7000 students, faculty and staff from Seneca College on the Keele campus.
- We estimated the University’s annual economic impact in the GTA at $3.4 Billion in 2003 and the annual York payroll was $391 Million.
- York had 172,000 alumni and 140,000 of them lived in the GTA.
- On the transportation side the university had 10,000 parking spaces and generated 36,000 car trips to campus on peak days.
- Maybe most important was the fact that there were over 1600 bus trips to campus each day in 2005, (764 TTC, 460 GO Transit, 106 York Region Transit, 170 VIVA, 40 Wheeltrans, 30 YRT Mobility, 34 YorkU, and 4 Greyhound (on Friday only)) as well as 8 Go Trains a day stopping at the York University station 1.6 km east of campus and linked by shuttle buses.

One of the most effective communication pieces we produced was a 2005 video of all of the1600 buses through the York Common filmed, by John Briggs and the York Instructional Technology Centre group, from the roof of Vari Hall for one day from dawn to dusk and then played back at high speed. The video showed buses flying through the Common and the lineups for the TTC buses growing like snakes and then being sucked into the buses. We played the original TTC subway song from 1953 as the background music. No one who saw the 5 minute compression of a full day’s bus traffic in the Common failed to recognize how important York had become as a transportation hub. We played the video for any group we could get access to from our York Board of Governors, to presidents of other universities, and at a TTC Commission meeting. We distributed the video extensively to all members of the TTC and other city councillors as well as to selected MPs and MPPs.

Success at Last in the New Century

By the early 2000s things started to come together in support of expanded transit initiatives in the GTA. All three levels of government began to show increased interest in new projects however funding remained a significant barrier. We sensed we had a growing level of support from city councillors from all parts of the city based on our success in raising York’s profile and in showing that York students came from every corner of the GTA.

By 2000 York University was established as an important transportation destination in the GTA with hundreds of bus trips a day to the campus, most of which connected York to the Spadina subway at Downsview station. But the evolution of York into one of the most important transit hubs in the GTA had just begun. By 2005 the bus traffic to campus had exploded to more than 1600 bus trips a day as detailed above.

In 2000, GO Transit, under the leadership of Gary McNeil, then Managing Director of GO and a York Geography and Urban Studies alumni, initiated GO’s very successful 407 GO Bus service along the recently opened Highway 407. The new bus service connected Markham in the east to Oakville in the west with major stops in Unionville, Richmond Hill, Brampton, and Mississauga. York University was the central hub in the system with all buses diverting off 407 at Keele Street to come south to the campus where bus connections to the subway were available. York students were then and have always been the core component of the ridership on this highly successful service which has now been extended to the University Of Ontario Institute Of Technology in Oshawa in the east, and to McMaster University and the University of Guelph in the west. In the wake of their 407 GO Bus success, in 2002 GO Transit added a York University stop on their Bradford (now Barrie) train service by constructing a platform in the industrial area 1.6 kms east of the York campus. The five morning and five evening commuter trains are connected to the campus by York University Shuttle bus service. By

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2005 there were 460 Go Buses and 8 trains serving York each day.

In 2001 five separate municipal transit systems in York Region joined together to form York Region Transit (YRT). The new integrated service provided for more and better local bus service to the campus from the north. In 2005 York Region established their VIVA express bus service and all buses on the Hwy 7 Route come south on Jane Street or Keele Street to serve the campus. By 2005 there were 106 YRT Buses, 170 VIVA buses, and 30 YRT Mobility buses serving the campus daily from York Region.

By 2000 many studies were underway inside and outside of government and a regional focus for transit planning was becoming more the norm than the earlier focus on the TTC and City of Toronto alone. However it was the TTC that produced the most important documents for our initiative. In August of 2001 the TTC completed their TTC Rapid Transit Expansion Study (RTES). The study was intended to lay out needs and priorities for rapid transit expansion in Toronto over a 10 to 15 year period to support population and employment growth as envisaged in the new Toronto Official Plan. The Study began by studying six possible subway expansion corridors with a total of 15 options. In the end the study concluded that only two corridors warranted short listing and they were a Spadina Subway extension to Steeles Avenue and an eastward extension of the Sheppard Subway. Regarding the Spadina extension the study had reviewed the 1993 proposal for a subway loop to Yonge Street and concluded the loop strategy no longer made sense. In its place the study proposed a radial extension of the Spadina subway through the York campus to Steeles Avenue or alternatively through the campus and into York Region with the terminus at the future Vaughan Corporate Centre at Hwy 7 west of Jane Street. In either case the plan included a major interregional bus terminal north of the campus removing most of the TTC and regional buses from the centre of the campus. The Study also acknowledged that further study of alternate more central routes through the campus should be undertaken. For the first time in a major official TTC report the value of linkages beyond the City boundary was recognized and radial routes with the potential to extend into the 905 were given serious consideration.

In 2003 the TTC produced another key report, TTC Ridership Growth Strategy 2003. This report recognized that while future subway projects would be delayed by a lack of funding there were short term alternatives available that could be put in place. Several priority project proposals were endorsed including a proposal for the implementation of the York University Busway bus rapid transit scheme between York University and Downsview Station. A full environmental assessment was launched and a number of routes studied. The final report proposed a Busway route up Dufferin Street in a dedicated transit lane, then west across the Finch Hydro Corridor to Keele, and north though the York campus on new bus only roads linking to the University Common bus stops. Some of us engaged in transit planning at York were very concerned that this project might result in further delays to a subway extension. We feared that the then Chair of the TTC, Howard Moscoe, and maybe even the mayor, saw the York University Busway as a way to lower the priority of our subway extension. The Environmental Assessment was complete with approvals in 2006 and the project went ahead with funding from all three levels of government and was presented as a demonstration of the potential for bus rapid transit in the GTA. After design, property acquisition and construction delays the project did not open until 2009 with the expectation it would be closed when the Subway was extended.

Concurrently with the ridership growth work and the Busway planning, the TTC followed up the RTES study with the launch of an Environmental Assessment of the Spadina Subway Extension to Steeles Avenue. The study was framed as an extension of the 1993 EA for the Loop proposal. This meant the study focused on alternative subway route selection and station locations and was not required to revisit questions of appropriate technology. Several routes were examined and detailed studies completed including for a range of alternative routes through York. It was a massive study and as the University’s representative on the EA Technical Advisory Committee I was on the inside of the evaluation process representing York and I learned a tremendous amount, particularly from Tom Middlebrook the TTC’s chief engineer on the study, about transit planning and the complex issues to be addressed. In the final analysis the study concluded that the best route would head west from Downsview Station through the north end of Downsview Park, then north under Keele Street to the southeast corner of the York Campus where it would take a northwest alignment heading under the Schulich Building and the east end of York Lanes to a major transit terminal near the Northwest Gate on Steeles Avenue. Five stations were planned north of Downsview. All three levels of government shared the cost of the study and York Region contributed to the municipal share. York Region also initiated a corridor protection study of it own to set out a future route from Steeles Avenue north to the Vaughan Corporate Centre and they acquired property on the north side of Steeles Avenue at the Northwest Gate for a regional transit terminal.

From 1998 onward I attended all TTC Commission meetings when subway expansion was on the agenda. On several occasions I made formal deputations on behalf of the University and our subway supporters. On one occasion I managed to get invited to show our video although it put me way beyond the time limit for deputations. We had a number of strong supporters on the TTC Commission but we were never really sure where the Chair, Howard Moscoe, stood on our proposal.

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In the summer and fall of 2003 we participated in the Toronto mayoral election that saw David Miller elected to his first term as mayor. We attended many public meetings and met with all candidates to help ensure that transportation issues including the Spadina extension were high on the agenda of all candidates and that they were all aware of the significance of York University as one of the busiest transportation hubs in the GTA.

2006 The McGuinty Government Made it Happen

By 2006 all the studies were complete and approved but there was no funding for such a large project and the Sheppard extension was still a competing project at the TTC and at City Council. We were continuing to advance the subway case whenever and wherever possible, the interim busway was still in the planning stage, and the TTC was focused on what they called funding for state of good repair and operating capital not major projects. But at the federal level the Kyoto Accord had been signed and the province had released its Smart Growth initiative. Rapid transit was moving back near the top of the agenda in the GTA.

In the spring 2006 Provincial Budget, the Government of Ontario announced the creation of “Move Ontario”, for the purpose of investing in public transit, roads and bridges and included in the allocation was an amount of $670 million to assist funding the capital costs of the Spadina Subway extension not just to Steeles Avenue but all the way to the Vaughan Corporate Centre. We recognized the work of the Honourable Greg Sorbara, MPP for Vaughan and a York graduate, and our best friend in the government of Ontario, who had succeeded in making the Spadina Subway extension the cornerstone of the provincial transit initiatives for the first time linking the 416 and the 905. Very significantly the budget stipulated that the money was to be moved into an income generating trust such that it could only be used for the Subway Extension and would not be subject to further trade offs at the TTC or City, or by a future provincial government. The subway was going to extend into the 905 for the first time.

The proposed funding arrangement was that the federal government would be asked to match the provincial contribution and that the municipalities would cover the balance of the cost which was then estimated to total $2.1 Billion. In March of 2007 the Harper Government pledged $697 Million as the federal contribution to the project. Subsequently the City of Toronto and York Region agreed to share the municipal share of the cost with Toronto paying 60% and York Region paying 40%. Finally the province added a further $200 million to the Trust. In the end the total cost was projected at $2.6 Billion and the federal share is $697 Million or 26.5%, the provincial share is $1.06 Billion or 40.2% and the municipal share is $878 Million or 33.3%. Of course the subway plan also involved new costs for the University but we had strong support from our Vice President Finance, Gary Brewer, our Board of Governors and from a wide coalition students, faculty and support staff.

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With the announcement that the project was funded and would be proceeding to the construction phase, I ended my role on behalf of the university and passed responsibility over to the York University Development Corporation (YUDC). YUDC, under the leadership of Bud Purves and Chris Wong, has subsequently revised the York University Master Plan, negotiated a new York University Secondary Plan with the City of Toronto, and continued working with the TTC through the design and construction phases of the project.

The Final Project Design
At the time of writing in December 2012, the construction of the subway extension is well underway and I am told that there are now 1984 bus trips a day at York. The expected completion date is now in the late fall of 2016. The project plan is laid out on the TTC map [on the cover of this issue of Contour Lines] and regular TTC construction updates are available on the project website at www.spadina.ttc.ca

York University will be served by three subway stations, Finch West Station which will provide a direct connection to the heavily travelled Finch bus route and a future connection to the Finch LRT, The York University Station which will be at the east end of the Harry Arthurs Common in the centre of the campus, and the Steeles West Station near the Northwest Gate with a major bus terminal for the TTC Jane, Steeles and Keele buses and selected YRT routes. A station at 407 will become the main terminal for the 407 GO Bus service, and the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre Station at Highway 7 will become the main terminal for the YRT, VIVA and Brampton bus services. I understand that plans are being made to allow riders destined for the University and transferring from GO, YRT, VIVA and Brampton routes to not have to pay a second fare for their short Subway trip to the campus. When the extension opens in 2016 all of the GO and VIVA buses and most of the YRT buses will be off campus feeding into the new bus terminals at the 407 and Vaughan Stations. The TTC 196 will be no more and most of the other TTC routes will feed into the Steeles West Bus terminal north of the campus. The University Common will return to university uses some of us hope with no cars at all.

As of December 2012 the twin tunnels are now complete from Steeles Avenue to Finch under the York campus, and from Finch to the Sheppard West Station which is located in Downsview Park. Tunneling operations are underway between Sheppard West and Downsview Station and tunneling will commence early in 2013 on the northern tunnels between 407 and Steeles West and then between 407 and the Vaughan metropolitan centre at Hwy 7. The next stage of the project involves station construction. Work on the York University Station in the Harry Arthurs Common is already underway with the subway tunnels being excavated so that they can be opened up for the construction of the York University Station.

Final Reflection
Who could have imagined in 1970 when the York community was signing on to stop the Spadina Expressway that we would wait 46 more years before the subway would finally roll into the York University Station in 2016. I hope that when it happens I will be there on the platform to see the first train arrive. I owe a huge vote of thanks to Lorna Marsden for inviting me to be part of her administration and for letting me work on this most rewarding of files. The thing I value most about my time at York is the fact that every day I had opportunities to learn new things and most of the time it was fun.

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We wish to thank John Lennox, Professor Emeritus in English, and former Dean of Graduate Studies, for suggesting that Ted Spence be asked to record his experiences in fighting for the subway.

Ted Spence taught geography in the Department 1970-91, and took on various administrative positions at York before retiring in 2006. He has been Chair of the Department of Geography, Associate Dean of Arts, Dean of Environmental Studies and Senior Policy Advisor, Office of the President.

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